

Orwell on Kipling: an imperialist, a gentleman and a great artist

J. Carlos Viana Ferreira

Centro de Estudos Anglísticos, Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Lisboa

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Five days after Rudyard Kipling's death on 18 January 1936, George Orwell published a short essay in the *New English Weekly* as an obituary or as a sort of tribute to the "household god" with whom he had grown up:

For my own part I worshipped Kipling at thirteen, loathed him at seventeen, enjoyed him at twenty-five and now again rather admire him. The one thing that was never possible, if one had read him at all, was to forget him. (CW X 409)

For a better appreciation of this passage we should remember that Eric Arthur Blair, later known by his pen name George Orwell, was born in 1903 in India, attended Eton College from 1917 to 1921, and served the Indian Imperial Police in Burma for five years until he resigned in 1928, due to a feeling of overwhelming revulsion and an intense loathing of the imperialism of which he had been a part (*Road* 126). Thus, it was Orwell, the anti-imperialist and radical socialist who, despite strongly disapproving of both Kipling's alleged jingo imperialism and his moral insensitiveness, acknowledged that Kipling behaved like a gentleman throughout his life and, by creating memorable catch-phrases of general use, had a streak of genius (CW 410). It is this complex picture of Kipling's work and personality, as sketched by Orwell, which I intend to explore.

In 1882, "at sixteen and nine months" (*Something* 29), Kipling returned to India to take up the post of assistant editor on the *Civil and Military Gazette* in Lahore, a city he later described as "The City of Dreadful Night". In the next seven years Kipling would publish collections of verse (*Departmental Ditties*, 1886) and of short stories (*Plain Tales from the Hills*, 1888), which would prove but the first stage of the amazing literary success he achieved between the last decade of the nineteenth

century and the outbreak of the Great War, a success which reached its zenith when Kipling was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907.

The popularity Kipling enjoyed was so widespread that he was acclaimed the “Laureate of the Empire” (Gilmour, *Long Recessional* 123) and Orwell called him “the prophet of British Imperialism in its expansionist phase” (CW XII 152). At the peak of his fame Kipling was sounded out for the Poet Laureateship and for a knighthood, but he consistently declined state-sponsored honours and never accepted payment for the usual publication of his anthems in the *Times*, such as “Hymn before Action” and “Recessional”, because they were of a “national character” (Gilmour 118). As Orwell declared with approval, there could be no doubt of Kipling’s *personal* decency “as no one so consistently refrained from making a vulgar show of his personality” (CW X 410).

Therefore, the heart of the matter was not Kipling’s personal decency but rather his political opinions, namely “the imperialism to which he chose to lend his genius” (*idem*). And Orwell showed his strong disapproval in the longer essay published in February 1942: “It is no use pretending that Kipling’s view of life, as a whole, can be accepted or even forgiven by any civilised person. (...) Kipling *is* a jingo imperialist; he *is* morally insensitive and aesthetically disgusting” (CW XIII 151).

Notwithstanding these words of condemnation, Orwell admitted that the imperialism of the last two decades of the nineteenth century was “sentimental, ignorant and dangerous, but it was not entirely despicable” (CW X 410) as it would become in the 1920s, which Orwell dubbed “Pox Britannica” through the words of Flory, the protagonist in his novel *Burmese Days* (40). Orwell concluded his notice with this unexpected statement (CW X 410): “It was still possible to be an imperialist and a gentleman ...”

In fact, the late nineteenth century witnessed both the Scramble for Africa and the emergence of New Imperialism, and Kipling has often been identified with this complex phenomenon composed of a blend of aggressive expansionism, jingoism, racial pride and economic exploitation. However, although the terms “empire” and “imperialism” were used since the beginning of the twentieth century with a strongly negative connotation to describe an arrogant form of English nationalism, the imperial idea also entailed a sense of duty, of moral responsibility, of a paternal mission to be

fulfilled for the benefit of subject peoples since Edmund Burke's doctrine of trusteeship in the Speech on Fox's East India Bill in 1783 (Burke, *Speeches* 291). In the early and mid-Victorian periods, the emphasis shifted to the British colonies of settlement, and the idea of a great imperial destiny to establish British people and institutions overseas based on emigration and investment soon met with popular approval (Eldridge 1996 31). Kipling would write in "The Song of the Dead" (1893):

We were dreamers, dreaming greatly, in the manstified town;
We yearned beyond the sky-line where the strange roads go
down.
Came the Whisper, came the Vision, came the Power with
the Need,
Till the Soul that is not man's soul was lent us to lead.
(*Collected* 179)

This powerful sentiment that Providence had blessed the Anglo-Saxon race and the English civilization was further encouraged by Sir Charles Dilke's racial nationalism in his work *Greater Britain* (1869). Assuming the Darwinian principle of natural selection and the competition for survival, he believed in the gradual extinction of the lesser races (Dilke, *Greater* 100) and in the civilising mission of the Anglo-Saxons, because Nature seemed to intend the English to direct and guide the Eastern peoples (194), educating the Indian races for freedom and planting free institutions among them (Eldridge, *Mission* 49). "In this view", as A. P. Thornton (*Idea* 39) remarked, "England's mission was a charge and a responsibility: and it agrees with Kipling thirty years ahead".

In fact, the widely-known poem "The White Man's Burden" (*Collected* 334-35) encapsulates Kipling's vision of the British Empire as a moral trusteeship for the welfare of "the silent, sullen peoples". The white man sacrifices his sons in their youth ("the best ye breed"), and paradoxically sends them to exile to "serve your captives" need", namely to wage "The savage wars of peace-/ Fill full the mouth of Famine / And bid the sickness cease", and to build bridges, ports and roads out of the deep sense of duty and commitment to the progress of subject races. An admirer of Carlyle's gospel of work (Rutherford vii), Kipling took the opportunity to vindicate the self-abnegation of the English in a response to his cousin's Margaret Burne-Jones question:

(...) ‘do the English as a rule feel the welfare of the natives much at heart.’ (...) What else are we working in the country for. For what else do the best men of the Commission die from overwork, and disease, if not to keep the people alive in the first place and healthy in the second. We spend our best men on the country like water and if ever a foreign country was made better through ‘the blood of the martyrs’ India is that country. (...) you can read for yourself how Englishmen have laboured and died for the peoples of the country. (Kipling, “Letter” 266-67)

A wide gulf separated Kipling’s lofty ideal from reality, as he was not aware of the disguised political and economic exploitation, but those qualities of hard work, honesty and selfless devotion to duty — as aspects of the code of conduct Kipling dubbed “The Law” — did redeem imperialism and its servants in India and elsewhere (Brantlinger 135). And it was Joseph Conrad himself who acknowledged in *Heart of Darkness* the power of that imperial idea at the end of the nineteenth century:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea — something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to (...). (7)

Now we can understand why Orwell found this imperialism “sentimental and not entirely despicable”, expressed as it was in high-flown language extolling the spirit of service. However, alongside this idealistic frame of mind, and as the outcome of Disraeli’s policy of “occupy, fortify, grab and brag”, jingoistic outbursts, and the ensuing annexations in the 1870s and 1880s, together with the hardening of racial prejudice following the spread of Social Darwinism, the use of force against “lesser breeds” became a legitimate weapon in the struggle of civilisation against so-called superstition (Eldridge, *Imperial* 60). As Joseph Chamberlain declared: “You cannot have omelettes without breaking eggs; you cannot destroy the practices of barbarism, of slavery, of superstition (...) without the use of force” (*Foreign* 245). But Chamberlain should have explained why the fulfilling of such

noble mission on behalf of civilisation did entail dispossessing the natives from their own lands. Chamberlain, Kipling and most of their supporters were fully convinced they were aiming at “the happiness and prosperity of the people”, bringing them the rule of Law, security and peace, but downplaying the economic exploitation of those subject peoples. By describing the natives as wild, sullen, slothful, heathen, childish and diabolical the poem “The White Man’s Burden” conveys a clearly racist message and embodies the imperial frame of mind of the late 1890s, but it would be misleading for a better understanding of Kipling to concentrate our analysis on that poem and not to mention “Recessional” (1897), a *nuzzur-wattu* or averter of the evil eye as Kipling explained in his autobiography (*Something* 100). Published at the end of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, “Recessional” was a reaction against the overflow of imperial pride of the jingoistic sort and a call to humility. Kipling, the imperial Prophet, unexpectedly drew attention to the transience of empires (“The tumult and the shouting die; / The Captains and the Kings depart”), and warned his people against overlooking the fulfilment of the imperial mission.

Coming from the living symbol of imperialism, Kipling’s misgivings generated widespread surprise because they showed him concerned with the devotion to duty rather than with the extension of the Empire. In fact, as the rich variety of his works testifies, he cannot be reduced to the role of a bellicose, boastful and coarse imperialist, although Orwell’s charge of “moral insensitiveness” was fair, but incomplete. And I suspect that Orwell would also agree that Kipling’s works provide us with telling examples of his concern and sensitiveness to the sufferings of colonised men and women. As David Gilmour suggested, Kipling was a two-sided man who kept both sides of his character quite separate and opposite:

One side stayed with him in the office and the Club, mocking Indians for their political pretensions (...). And the other, intensely receptive to sights, smells and sounds, roamed the bazaars and the native states, absorbing the experience without feeling the need to censure. (*Long* 54)

A few examples will illustrate Kipling’s complexity and ambivalence. “Lispeth” in the collection *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888) presents us with a sympathetic portrayal of a beautiful and independent-minded hill-

girl, Lispeth, who was deceived by an Englishman and a couple of Christian missionaries, a description interspersed with patronising comments such as “It takes a great deal of Christianity to wipe out uncivilised Eastern instincts, such as falling in love at first sight” (9) and “Being a savage by birth, she took no trouble to hide her feelings and the Englishman was amused” (9). Apparently Lispeth had assimilated to Western Christian ways. She had been baptised as an infant, lived with the Chaplain and his wife, never abandoned Christianity, and her own people hated her because she had become a white woman and washed herself daily (7-8). Tall and so beautiful like the Roman goddess Diana, she attended Sunday school and read all the books available in the house, so that we may rightly infer she was intellectually alive and no longer “a savage”. However, Lispeth intended to marry an Englishman whom she had found hurt on the hills and carried to the Chaplain’s house. During his period of recovery, the Englishman, “a traveller in the East”, flirted with Lispeth and assured her that he would come back and marry her, a statement also confirmed by the Chaplain’s wife. When Lispeth became aware some months later that she had been deliberately deceived by the representatives of Christian morality, she felt she had been betrayed and returned to her own people. And although the narrator describes this event in a patronising manner — “She took to her own unclean people savagely” — the fact is that the Chaplain and his wife were accused of being liars and, therefore, proved unable to retain the moral high ground.

Secondly, “Beyond the Pale” is another story of a man, Trejago, who stepped beyond the limits of acceptable behaviour and became involved with a 15-year old Hindu widow, Bisesa, in a doomed interracial relationship. The narrator starts with the ominous sentence “A Man should, whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race, and breed” (127) but not only does the epigraph contradict it (“Love heeds not caste nor sleep a broken bed. I went in search of love and lost myself”) but the love relationship is presented in a positive light as well, in spite of the tragic outcome. Trejago, an English civil servant who usually took up night wanderings and was criticised by the narrator for his excessive interest in native life — a feature he shared with Strickland, a famous Kipling’s character distinguished by the “gift of invisibility”(24) and by the “outlandish custom of prying into native life” (25) — managed to decipher an object-letter he

had received and started a dreamlike love relationship with Bisesa, thus crossing the racial divide and disregarding the narrator's advice that a man should keep to his own caste, race, and breed. This wild double life was grounded on true mutual affection and, although different cultural values proved unsurmountable and led to a tragic outcome, Trejago's behaviour was devoid of any derogatory or supercilious sign betraying superiority.

Lastly, "Without Benefit of Clergy", first appeared in a volume entitled *The Courting of Dinah Shadd* in 1890 and then published in *Life's Handicap* (1891), portrays another case of doomed interracial love between John Holden, a civil servant, and Ameera, a 16-year old Muslim girl whom he purchased from his mother. Their mixed-marriage defied convention and they experienced perfect happiness for some time: Ameera was "all but all the world in his eyes" and John her king (*Life's* 116). The birth of their son made him feel "full of riotous exultation" and further strengthened their passionate relationship, which both attempted to protect by resorting to rituals. Ameera prayed to the Prophet and to Beebee Miriam [the Virgin Mary], and John performed the birth-sacrifice by cutting the heads of two goats with a sabre (120). Then, suddenly, "the seasonal autumn fever" took away their son's life and "months of absolute happiness" came to an end (127). Soon afterwards, Ameera died of black cholera, their house was torn down and John felt devastated.

One of Kipling's best tales of interracial love, "Without Benefit of Clergy" has been regarded as displaying the failure of ritual (Gilbert 54), as well as John's and Ameera's incapacity to "transcend the racial differences and successfully fuse both cultures" (Meyers 59). According to Jeffrey Meyer, the marriage was doomed to destruction to sanction Kipling's "colour prejudice" and "superiority complex of his age" (62). On the contrary, I suggest that Kipling displays a deep understanding, tenderness and a highly sensitive empathy for the sufferings of the couple, and particularly for Ameera's overwhelming grief, together with a pervading feeling of respect for her behaviour and culture, which contradict charges of unfeeling racism and Said's orientalist stereotype.

All the stories mentioned above testify to the complexity of Kipling's portrayal of native Indian peoples, and undermine any attempt to reduce Kipling to a mere racist imperialist. As Orwell remarked, Kipling was the only English writer of his time to have added phrases to the language, such

as “East is East, and West is West”, “The white man’s burden”, “What do they know of England who only England know?” and “He travels the faster who travels alone”. Orwell deeply regretted that Kipling had chosen to lend his genius to imperialism, thus becoming “a kind of enemy, a man of alien and perverted genius” (CW X 410). A great artist, even though an imperialist. But Orwell should not have overlooked *Kim*, a novel in colonial India which almost redeemed Kipling from the charges of callous insensitiveness and racism.

In fact, *Kim* is a celebration of life in all its variety of colours, shapes, people, customs, religions and cultures. And it becomes all the more significant that the boy-hero Kim, whose father had been a Mason, is aptly nicknamed “Friend of All the World”, as he loved the game of life for its own sake (5). The wonderful spectacle of the Grand Trunk Road, all those castes and kinds of men going and coming — “brahmins, bankers and tinkers, barbers, pilgrims and potters” (51) — depict the “smiling river of life”, coming across “new people and new sights at every stride” (55). Kim is pure concentrated joy or, as Brantlinger remarked, “happiness personified” (136).

Edward Said (30) classified *Kim* as a master work of imperialism, but he took pains to emphasize its great aesthetic merit which could not be dismissed as the product of a disturbed racist imagination. But Gilmour (68) and other critics regard its imperialist framework a minor defect beside the book’s overall achievement, surely the most acclaimed of Kipling’s works which played an important role in the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, 1907. However, as Orwell acutely observed, Kipling could not understand what was at stake, “because he had never had any grasp of the economic forces underlying imperial expansion (CW XIII 152). And to make matters worse, particularly after the First World War, Kipling abandoned the broadmindedness of his Indian years and, to quote Brantlinger (138), “lost much of his appreciation for the Diversity of Creatures that populated God’s creation” and became increasingly “an intolerant chauvinist”.

And yet, this chauvinist and jingo imperialist could write the following stanza, celebrating *Otherness* and taken from the poem entitled “We and They”:

All good people agree,
 And all good people say,
 All nice people, like Us, are We
 And everyone else is They:
 But if you cross over the sea,
 Instead of over the way,
 You may end by (think of it!) looking on We
 As only a sort of They. (*Collected* 790)

Kipling's many-sided creativity defies taxonomic straitjackets imposed by ideology or a particular literary taste. And that was why Orwell felt compelled to acknowledge, no matter how repulsive Kipling's imperialistic views were, then and now, that Kipling's artistry endures and continuously surprise us.

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ABSTRACT

Eric Arthur Blair, later known by his pen name George Orwell, was born in 1903 in India, attended Eton College from 1917 to 1921, and served the Indian Imperial Police in Burma for five years until he resigned in 1928, due to a feeling of overwhelming revulsion and an intense loathing of the imperialism of which he had been a part. Thus, it was Orwell, the anti-imperialist and radical socialist who, despite strongly disapproving of both Kipling's alleged jingo imperialism and his moral insensitiveness, acknowledged that Kipling behaved like a gentleman throughout his life and, by creating memorable catch-phrases of general use, had a streak of genius (CW 410). It is this complex picture of Kipling's work and personality, as sketched by Orwell, which this essay will explore.

KEYWORDS

Orwell; Kipling; Imperialism; creativity; empathy

RESUMO

Eric Arthur Blair, posteriormente conhecido pelo pseudônimo George Orwell, nasceu em 1903 na Índia, frequentou a escola de Eton entre 1917 e 1921, e cumpriu cinco anos como agente da Indian Imperial Police até que apresentou a demissão em 1928, devido um sentimento de profunda repulsa e repugnância pelo imperialismo de que tinha sido uma peça. Por isso, foi irônico que tenha sido Orwell, anti-imperialista e socialista radical que, apesar da forte censura que lhe mereceu o imperialismo jingoísta de Kipling e respectiva insensibilidade moral, tenha reconhecido que Kipling sempre se portara como um cavalheiro e tinha um toque de génio, traduzido em expressões memoráveis de uso quotidiano. É este quadro complexo da obra e da personalidade de Kipling, esboçado por Orwell, que este ensaio visa explorar.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Orwell; Kipling; Imperialismo; criatividade; empatia
